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National NIH Initiative Aims to Reduce Kidney Failure Among African Americans

The National Kidney Disease Education Program (NKDEP) today began its first national effort to call attention to the seriousness of kidney disease and the importance of testing those at high risk, particularly African Americans, a group hit especially hard.

Kidney disease has no warning signs in its early stages and many of those at high risk do not know it. But its impact is clear. Twenty million people have kidney disease. The number of people already on dialysis or with a kidney transplant because their kidneys failed has doubled each decade for the past two decades. Nearly half a million people now have kidney failure—a number expected to surpass 660,000 by 2010. In addition to the human toll, the annual cost of treating patients with kidney failure in the United States is more than \$20 billion.

The impact of kidney disease is disproportionate among African Americans. They are four times more likely than Caucasians to develop kidney failure. And while African Americans make up just 12 percent of the population, they account for 30 percent of people with kidney failure. A significant disparity is found among African American men ages 22 to 44, who are 20-times more likely to develop kidney failure from hypertension compared to their Caucasian counterparts.

“It’s critical that we get in front of this growing epidemic. People’s lives don’t have to be devastated by kidney failure,” says Thomas Hostetter, M.D., director of NKDEP, which is an initiative of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). “We want people at high risk for kidney disease, particularly African Americans, to know they are at risk and that they can do something about it.”

That’s the aim of NKDEP’s *You Have The Power To Prevent Kidney Disease* campaign. It stresses three key messages: 1) know if you are at risk, 2) have your kidneys tested if you are at risk, and 3) kidney failure can be slowed or prevented if kidney disease is detected early.

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To help spread the word, NKDEP is working with African American consumer and civic groups to communicate kidney disease information to their members and within their communities. This summer, the campaign also will have a presence at several major events that target African Americans. Planning is underway to expand NKDEP's outreach to other high-risk populations.

The first NIH study to assess African Americans' knowledge and awareness about kidney disease shows that many are unaware of their high risk and of preventive measures. Conducted among 2,000 African Americans in April 2003, the study found that although 44 percent of respondents had at least one major kidney disease risk factor—diabetes, high blood pressure or a family history of kidney failure—only 15 percent felt their personal risk for developing the disease was higher than average.

In addition, only 17 percent named kidney disease as a consequence of diabetes and only 8 percent named it as a consequence of high blood pressure. These two diseases are the leading causes of kidney failure in the United States, accounting for more than 70 percent of cases among adults, according to the U.S. Renal Data System.

“People just don't make the connection between their diabetes or high blood pressure and kidney disease,” says Dr. Hostetter. “Most people can reduce their risk of developing kidney failure by managing high blood pressure and diabetes. It is also important for those at risk, individuals with diabetes or high blood pressure or a family history of kidney failure, to get tested for kidney disease.”

The good news is that if kidney disease is detected early, medication is available to help slow its progression or prevent kidney failure—NKDEP's ultimate goal.

This national effort builds upon pilot education campaigns conducted in Atlanta, Baltimore, Cleveland and Jackson, Miss., over the past year. More than 30 public agencies and private organizations were involved in the pilot program's development and are supporting the program's national implementation.

For more information about kidney disease or the *You Have The Power To Prevent Kidney Disease* campaign, visit www.nkdep.nih.gov or call 1-866-4-KIDNEY.

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